

A Timely Intervention: Saving the St. John Parochial School Building

On August 20, 2024, the Society's executive director, Jesse Nasta, received a call from a trustee of the Parish of St. John Church who let Jesse know that the parish had sought a demolition permit for its former school building, which it could not afford to repair and considered unsafe. The demolition-delay, which pauses demolition in favor of exploring alternatives for buildings at least fifty years old, had been initiated by the City's Building Department. The Society is charged, as the successor to the Greater Middletown Preservation Trust, with addressing threats to historic structures.

Listed in 1983 on the National Register of Historic Places for its architectural and historic significance, the brick and brownstone St. John Parochial School, built in 1887–89, occupies a prominent position at the northern tip of Main Street. For many in Middletown and nearby communities who knew it as a school, the building embodies a wealth of memories. It had stood empty, however, for over a decade, and the Parish saw no viable way to preserve it.

The MCHS Historic Preservation Committee jumped into action, requesting a site visit with parish and municipal representatives. On August 28, two parish trustees, Jim Cahill and Janice Wendry, and the Building & Grounds chair, Myron Klein, took the Preservation Committee members Alain Munkittrick, Debby Shapiro, and Renée Tribert, and Middletown's Community Development Specialist, Brian Gartner, on a tour of the building. Three things became clear: the building was sound and largely intact; its floor plan made it a good candidate for adaptive reuse; and the parish did not truly want to demolish it.

Christine Marques, the Director of Economic and Community Development, took the matter in hand and placed it on the agenda of the September 10 Economic Development Commission. Representatives of the parish and the Norwich Diocese Property and Assets Committee, Bill Russell and Peter Harding, attended, as did members of the Society's Preservation Committee. Earnest conversations about alternatives to demolition began.

The Preservation Committee received permission to present the building as an opportunity for new use(s) and introduced three developers experienced with renovating historic structures to the parish and diocese. Committed to pushing for a positive outcome, the committee kept in regular touch with all parties. By November 2024, a working contract had been secured, and by March 2025, the developer, Parker Benjamin, was in the due diligence phase of the project.

Middletown municipal staff shepherded the project through review process. In August 2025, when the project came before the Zoning Board of Appeals and the Planning & Zoning Commission, the Society was represented by three Board members, Debby Shapiro, Renée Tribert, and Krishna Winston, who spoke in support of the necessary exceptions and approvals.

The project, which will create 16 residential units, has been named Keely Crossing, after the architect of the church, Patrick Charles Keely; the school itself was designed by Keely's partner, James Murphy. The Board takes great pride in this outcome for the building, the people of Middletown, those who attended the school, and the Preservation Committee!

—Renée Tribert

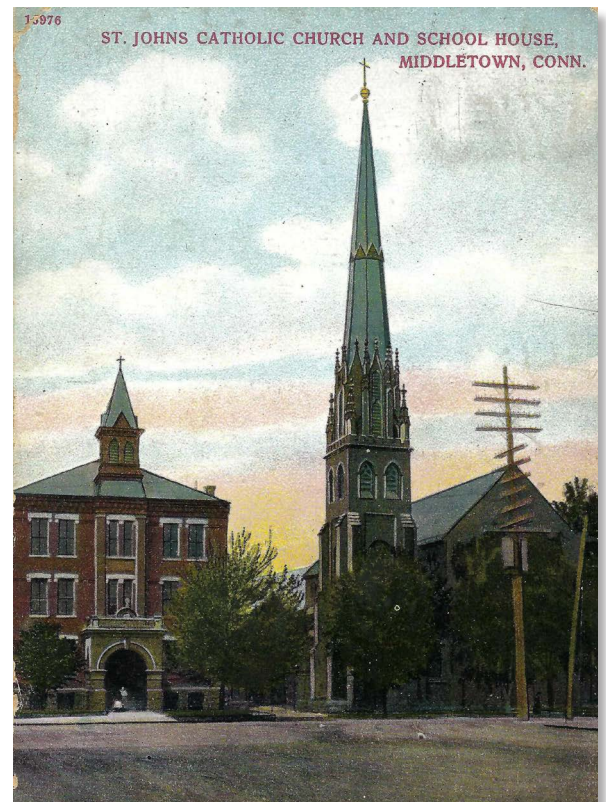


Illustration: 1908 postcard from the Middlesex County Historical Society's archives

Director's Message

As 2025 draws to a close, I wish to express my gratitude to our dedicated Board of Directors, other volunteers, and each one of you members, for making this another landmark year.

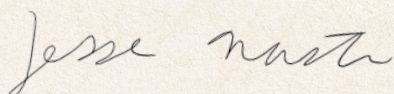
I am especially excited about our progress on the Leverett C. Beman Historic District (Beman Triangle) project. My research on this neighborhood, one of the first free, property-owning African American communities in pre-Civil War Connecticut, began two decades ago, when I was writing my Wesleyan senior thesis on the topic. The neighborhood's now 202-year-old Cross Street A.M.E. Zion Church served as a stop on the Underground Railroad. And the congregation's leaders, the Bemans, fought alongside Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and other famous figures, for African American freedom and citizenship. Since returning to Wesleyan in 2017 as a professor, I have taught a project-based course on the Beman Triangle nearly every year. During the past year, I worked closely with a committee of present and past leaders of the Society—Alain Munkittrick, Deborah Shapiro, Mardi Loman, Renée Tribert, and Joseph Samolis—to nominate the neighborhood for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. Once the process is complete, I will organize additional public events to commemorate, raise awareness of, and increase community engagement in the crucial African American and U.S. history that this neighborhood represents.

I would especially like to recognize and thank the Society's Historic Preservation Committee, particularly Board Member and historic preservationist Renée Tribert, for saving the 1880s St. John Parochial School building from demolition, thereby helping to maintain the historic character and charm of our beloved Main Street.

Our new website has been another major achievement of 2025. Thanks to the Mellon Foundation and Wesleyan University for funding this project, and to Josh Dennis, owner of Middletown-based MidConn Marketing, for his excellent work and ongoing support. If you do not yet receive our emailed announcements, please visit www.mchsct.org to sign up for our list.

In 2026, we will have more exciting programming to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, culminating in our exhibition, "Democracy at 250." This exhibition will feature 25 fascinating local figures who championed the ideals of the American Revolution, from 1776 to the present.

Very happy holidays, and thank you again for all your support,



Jesse Nasta, PhD
Executive Director

"Simple and Permanent Tablets:" MCHS Launches Heritage Date Plaque Program

The Middlesex County Historical Society is honored to offer these handsome Heritage Date Plaques to all house- and building-owners in northern Middlesex County, the Society's original service area. These custom-printed ceramic markers allow owners to proudly display the construction dates of their homes or buildings. The enameled plaques, 11^{1/2} inches wide, are made in Italy and custom-printed in the USA. Designed for outdoor use, they come with instructions for mounting to walls of various materials with two screws.

The plaque features the most recognizable natural feature of northern Middlesex County—the "Great Bend" in the Connecticut River, chosen for its importance to the history of the towns established on its banks and the indigenous settlements that preceded them. The plaque includes the name of the Society (chartered in 1901), demonstrating the property owner's personal interest in local history, pride of ownership, and commitment to supporting preservation of the county's stories, documents, and artifacts. In 1904, in his address to the MCHS, President of the Board A.W. Hazen proposed that "historic buildings and places" "be marked with simple and permanent tablets."



There is no minimum age requirement for a home or building to receive a Heritage Date Plaque, nor is there any requirement for compliance with historic preservation restrictions or standards. We simply ask that the owner provide the documented or approximate date of construction. For an additional fee the MCHS will provide assistance with research on the date. If a house or building is located in Middletown, Middlefield, Durham, Portland, East Hampton or Cromwell, it qualifies!

The Plaque makes a great holiday or birthday gift, as well as a house-warming present. The cost is \$140. Watch your email for information on how to order, which will also be posted on our website, www.mchsct.org.

—Alain Munkittrick

The Snare Drums Saved!

Thanks to generous donations from our members and friends, we have completed the restoration of our two historic snare drums, donated to the Society by Charles Harris, a descendant of the original owner, who played them as a member of Middletown's famous Hubbard Drum Corps band (1883–1912). Jim and Patsy Ellis, owners of Cooperman Drums in Bellows Falls, Vermont, meticulously cleaned the drum shells and the stay and flesh hoops, and added natural hemp ropes and goat skins, snares, and strainer mount hardware, stained leather rope pulls and "drag" ropes. All the replacement parts are authentic to the period when these drums were made. The conservation was fully documented with photos, written descriptions, and a video of Jim discussing the drums.



Before Restoration



After Restoration

Jim Ellis determined that, like many field drums of this period, the round wooden shells were reduced in height at some point to create a "brighter" sound, better suited for marching bands. From the distinctive brass tack patterns on the outside of the shells, Jim and Patsy deduced that the smaller drum was probably made by Alexander Rogers of Flushing, New York, and definitely dates to the Civil War period. They consider it likely that the larger drum was made before the Civil War by the Connecticut drum-maker Eli Brown. Brown drums are considered by connoisseurs of vintage drums to be "the Stradivarii" of 19th-century American drums.

Our restored snares are now ready for programs and display, and will be incorporated into an upcoming exhibition.

— *Alain Munkittrick*

"I Tesori di Middletown:" Wesleyan Italian Course Partners with MCHS to Study Local Italian American History

Most college students would expect their first advanced course in Italian to introduce them to the torments suffered by sinners in Dante's *Inferno* or to Primo Levi's account of his year in Auschwitz. Students at Wesleyan can, in fact, have both of those searing experiences. What may come as a surprise is that they can also study contemporary Italian podcasts, familiarize themselves with the podcast genre, and then create their own podcast episodes on Middletown's rich Italian American history, in Italian, for broadcast on WESU 88.1.



Illustration: St. Sebastian's Band in 1950. Photo from the Middlesex County Historical Society's archive. Gift of Sam Vinci.

In the fall of 2024, Hollis Professor of Romance Languages Ellen Nerenberg engaged her Italian 225 students in a course exemplifying what educators refer to as "project-based learning." She teamed up with the Historical Society's Executive Director, Jesse Nasta, and with numerous members of the Wesleyan and Middletown communities, for a cultural adventure that resulted in a three-episode podcast in Italian featuring the history of the Garibaldi Society, the Saint Sebastian convent (housed in what is now Kidcity Children's Museum), and the life of Emmanuel "Mim" Daddario, a Middletown native and Wesleyan graduate who served in Congress. These episodes are being broadcast this fall on Franco Liseo's long-running Saturday Italian-language radio show, *Avanti Tutta!*

More episodes will follow next spring, produced in this fall's iteration of the course. The students are coached by the teaching assistants from the University of Bologna who come to Wesleyan every year. Listeners to the podcast will improve their aural comprehension while learning about some treasures of Middletown's past.

— *Krishna Winston*

President's Message: Happy Holidays, MCHS Supporters!

We have concluded another successful year of activities, programming, and planning at the General Mansfield House. Thanks to your membership, donations, and volunteering, we have accomplished much. April's Annual Meeting kicked off our commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the founding of our Republic. This past year's highlight relating to the commemoration was the dedication of our Lafayette Trail Marker, with a garden party that followed—a social success that brought many new faces to the House. Our 250th Committee has great plans for the coming year.

Our annual Sheedy Challenge elicited charming family-history essays from Middletown third-graders, budding historians who undertook real research. Executive Director Jesse Nasta organized fascinating programs featuring Middletown figures as diverse as Katherine "Sissy" Wells, Dr. Louis Loffredo, and Max Corvo, while also overseeing Middletown and Wesleyan student interns in a wide array of research projects and welcoming many local and out-of-town visitors and researchers coming to explore our collections of manuscripts, genealogies, and artifacts.

Our committees have been hard at work. The Historic Preservation Committee led the effort to save the St. John School building from demolition, and identify its developer. We completed a much-needed update to the City's Historic Properties List, and responded to demolition requests involving historic buildings. Another committee submitted the final draft of the National Register of Historic Places nomination of the Leverett C. Beman Historic District to the State Historic Preservation Office. With Preservation CT we co-sponsored an open house at the Judge Seth Wetmore House (1742). The Car Show and Tag Sale Committees organized excellent fundraisers for us, and the hard-working Buildings & Grounds Committee cleaned out the sheds and the basement, and over-saw the painting of the outbuildings.

Your contributions to the Annual Appeal are absolutely vital to ensure that we can continue these efforts, maintain the Mansfield House and its grounds, and sustain our mission to preserve and present ALL of Middletown's history to ALL of Middletown's citizens. We are open to all, and welcome everyone as members, volunteers, and participants in our events. Please visit us. Please let us know how we are doing. Please support us. This is your Historical Society.

Many thanks, and best wishes for the holidays from our Board of Directors,



Alain D. Munkittrick, President

Lafayette in Middletown

September 4, 1824 was a day many of Middletown's 6,500 residents would remember for the rest of their lives. On that day General Lafayette, familiar to all as a hero of the Revolutionary War and lifelong admirer of America, arrived by boat in the part of town then known as the Upper Houses, now Cromwell. From there the General proceeded by carriage to the downtown, where cheering crowds lined the streets and local dignitaries were gathered to welcome him. A festive banquet had been prepared at the Mansion House Hotel, but Lafayette, weary from his strenuous tour of the New England states, chose to depart early, no doubt looking forward to a night's rest on the steam-boat that would carry him to New York. Disappointed though his hosts must have felt, the excitement that his visit had generated and the opportunity to glimpse the elderly gentleman and his son, George Washington Lafayette, ignited a lasting glow in the hearts and minds of the townsfolk.



Julien Icher, founder and president of The Lafayette Trail, Inc., speaks at the Lafayette plaque dedication in front of the Mansfield House, while Executive Director Jesse Nasta and Mayor Gene Nocera (right) look on after speaking.

Lafayette in Middletown (continued)



On August 22, 2025, a few days shy of 201 years after that event, the Historical Society marked the installation of a handsome plaque commemorating Lafayette's stopover in Middletown. More than 100 guests gathered on Main Street along the Society's fence, adorned with French and American bunting as it might have been in 1824. Executive Director Jesse Nasta welcomed Julien Icher, founder and president of The Lafayette Trail, Inc., and Mayor Gene Nocera, who recalled reading in his youth a book about Lafayette. He had been inspired, he said, by the promise the young nobleman saw in America and his willingness to risk life and limb to contribute to the fulfillment of that promise. Julien Icher spoke about his organization's educational mission and the Pomeroy Foundation's generosity in providing plaques to the towns Lafayette had visited on his

1824-25 farewell tour. When Jesse and the Mayor unveiled the plaque, a remarkable coincidence came to light: the Society, located at 151 Main Street, had received Plaque No. 151!

After the unveiling, the crowd moved to the garden behind the Mansfield House for thought-provoking short speeches by Alain Munkittrick and Julien Icher. Munkittrick spoke of his personal connection to France: his mother had been the first Frenchwoman to marry an American GI. Citing his research on Lafayette's visit, he noted that the General's carriage had made only two stops on its circuit through the downtown: one to greet the mortally ill Commodore Thomas Macdonough, and one to acknowledge Hamet Achmet, whom he had apparently met when Achmet was in service to Washington's household. Icher had chosen as the title of his talk "Lafayette and 'the Electric Spark of Liberty.'" He was quoting the tribute to Lafayette that Daniel Webster had made at the 1825 cornerstone-laying for the Bunker Hill Monument. As Webster put it, Heaven had chosen the Frenchman to conduct that spark from the New World to the Old. Icher stressed Lafayette's commitment to human rights, including those of women, and his firm opposition to slavery.

The guests lingered until after dark, enjoying each other's company and Franco-American refreshments that included brie on sliced baguette, crudités and aioli, Vermont cheddar and crackers, meringues, cookies decorated with the French and American flags, and madeleines, accompanied by French wines, gin-and-tonics, and non-alcoholic beverages.

—*Krishna Winston*

Fall Colors



39th Annual Car Show a Rousing Success

Sunday, October 5 dawned to a cloudless blue sky, and temperatures rose to the low 80s, ideal for the Car Show, the Society's single largest fundraiser apart from membership dues and donations. The cars, 109 in total, began arriving early. Many came in groups, as car enthusiasts often travel in convoy with their friends. This year's cars provided an exceptional show, much appreciated by the excited spectators.

The featured car was a 1963 Ford Falcon Sprint, purchased new by Gary Nenninger and cared for lovingly for 62 years. Winners of the trophies, handmade by the committee, were Scott Lynch, Mark French, John Tattersall, Charlie Cecchini, Mike Stupinski, Mark Morello, Jim Plunske, J. Lupo, Bob & Bev, and Bob Kalber. The winners came from Columbia, Ellington, Wallingford, Wethersfield, Southington, and Chester, in addition to Middletown.

The following businesses and individuals purchased ads in the Car Show book; Carl Guild & Associates; Martin Moving & Storage Co.; Guilmartin, DiPiro, and Sokolowski LLC; Labco Welding Inc.; Victor Auto Body Works; Courtney's Cleaning Services, LLC; Estate Treasures & Services; The River Suite; Custom Carpets; Moore Brothers Automotive Finishing & Repair; Tasca Ford; Siobhan McLaughlin Team, William Raveis; Cahill Earth Contractors; Smith & Bishel Co.; Ristorante Fiore; Bella Notte Italian Restaurant; Portland Transmission; Cross Street A.M.E. Zion Church; Lagana Florists; Pete & Isabelle Bozzo; Diane & Tony Petras; Thelma Ball Freeland; Deborah D. Shapiro; Middletown Framing; Portland Automotive, Inc; Town Fair Tire; Shapiro Law Offices LLC; Dan & Cathy Stebbins; Home Team Supply; Disabled American Veterans; Malloves Jewelers; Bergan Architectural Woodworking; Personal Auto Care Service Center Inc.; Comer and Company, LLC; Munkittrick Associates; Portland Historical Society; Greater Middletown Military Museum; Pullman & Comley Attorneys at Law; Buck Zaidel; Middletown Elks; Jerry Augustine; Lee Godburn; Berkshire Hathaway, Tina Lachance; Connecticut Rental Center; Larry Riley; Appleby Plumbing Co.; Rick Friswell; Craig Dennis Financial Advisor; Edward Jones; Wesleyan Wasch Seminars; Community Foundation of Middlesex County; Joan Liska; The Carabetta Companies; and 2 anonymous donors.

If you frequent the businesses, please thank them for supporting the Society!

—Deborah Shapiro



THANK YOU TO OUR 2025 MEMBERS AND DONORS!

Your generous support is vital to our work.

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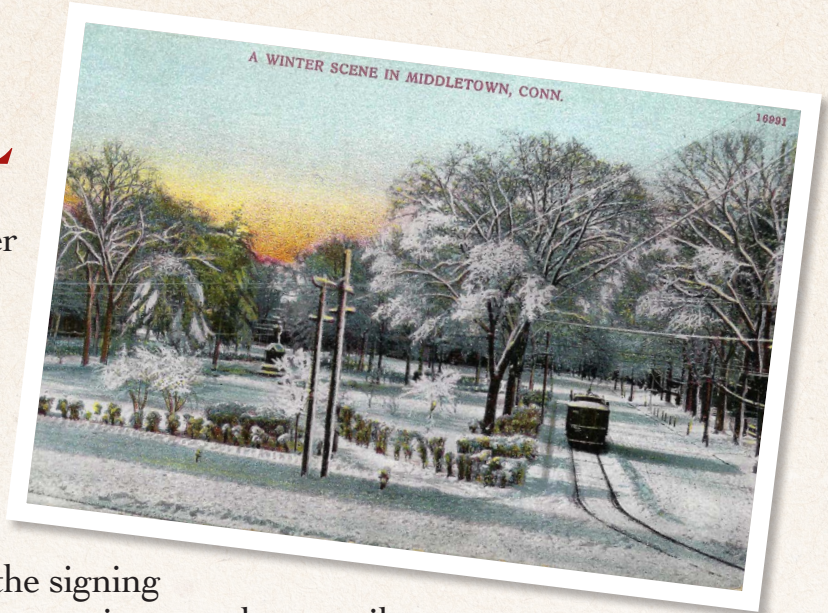
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Annual HOLIDAY APPEAL

As 2025 draws to a close, please consider supporting our annual year-end appeal as generously as you can.

Your generous support has made 2025 a year full of programs and events at the MCHS. With your help, we will continue to commemorate, celebrate, and reflect on the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in the coming months, unveil our "Democracy at 250" exhibition, add to our new and improved website, and continue our digitization efforts.

Donations can be sent in the enclosed envelope. You can also donate online by credit card, debit card, or PayPal, at mchsct.org/join-us/donate



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